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ABSTRACT

Telecourses differ in fundamental ways from regular college courses; i.e., faculty are not the only ones involved in telecourse design and production; colleges are not the sole funding agencies for their production; and telecourses are designed to be marketed, rather than to be offered by a single institution. These differences mean that traditional practices for setting and maintaining academic standards may not apply to telecourses. At the Coast Community College District (CCCD), standards for telecourse production are established through: (1) market research to outline curricular dimensions and current teaching practices on campus and nationwide; (2) definitions of course requirements, content parameters, and level; (3) prepared course descriptions; (4) a course team, including academic advisers and an instructional designer, to achieve quality productions; and (5) quality control procedures. Despite these thorough procedures for maintaining standards, telecourses have been under attack in California. Concern has been expressed at various levels; i.e., by CCCD faculty, by the Academic Senate of the California Community Colleges, by the colleges during accreditation self-studies, and by the Board of Admissions of the University of California. A flaw in the criticisms of telecourses arising in the CCCD is the tendency to compare telecourses with regular courses in terms of the amount of time students spend in the classroom or viewing telecourses, rather than in terms of what students have learned. (HB)

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"Quality Control in the Design and Production of Telecourses"

Presentation at AACJC

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Many of you are probably here hoping to hear about what has been happening to telecourses in California during the last year. There is much curiosity about the details of the faculty attack on telecourses at the Coast Community College District and investigations at the state level, and you probably want to know if such extreme reactions can be prevented in your college and state.

I will describe some specifics of the review and criticism of telecourses in California, but first, I would like to make some general comments about the question of how telecourses can be designed and produced to meet specified standards. The best defense against criticism and attacks on telecourses is to produce them to meet the highest standards for content and instructional design.

For purposes of comparison, it's useful to consider how standards are established and maintained for classroom instruction. The traditional measures for insuring quality in on-campus courses includes hiring competent instructors, providing facilities for effective presentation, and the outside review provided by governing boards and accrediting associations and state offices. However, telecourses are different from traditional courses in several ways, and these differences call into question the traditional measures of quality.

To briefly review the differences:

1) Faculty are not the only people involved in the design and production of telecourses. For example, television producers can define the video treatments used, professional scriptwriters may develop the narration, and actors may deliver the lines.

2) Colleges are not the sole funding agency for telecourse production: telecourses may be co-productions with other colleges; noneducational institutions such as the federal government and television stations may contribute funds. Now the commercial institutions are becoming involved, investing funds in telecourse production and distribution, with a profit-making goal. Multiple investors and co-producers raise questions of who is in control and what is the major purpose of the resulting telecourse?

3) Telecourses are not just designed, produced, and offered at one institution. Instead, they are "marketed" or "distributed." Educational materials developed by one institution, in one state, will be offered and granted credit by another institution in another state. It's interstate commerce and it raises questions of responsibility for quality. Course creation is separated by time and space and

responsibility from course offering. The highest standards in offering a course can't compensate for inaccurate and inappropriate content. On the other hand, a telecourse may have top-quality materials and programs, but it's the local institution that sets and maintains entrance, grading, and completion requirements. When looking at telecourse standards and quality, this separation between creation and offering is especially important.

These three differences between telecourses and classroom courses mean that the traditional practices for setting and maintaining academic standards aren't appropriate and may not apply to telecourses. If we look at the course creation side, we must ask: Who establishes the standards, and who reviews telecourses to see that those standards have been met?

The telecourses in use today throughout the country have been designed and produced primarily by academic institutions. And, in spite of the fact of multiple funders and institutions involved, I feel that, so far, responsibility for setting and meeting academic standards has been held by the producing school. But the producing schools have gone beyond traditional procedures for ensuring quality, and I want to briefly describe some of the procedures used during the design and production stages to set and maintain high academic standards. While some of my terms and examples arise out of the practices followed at the Coast Community College District, similar practices exist at the other telecourse producers such as the Dallas County Community College District, the National University Consortium, and the Southern California Consortium for Community College Television.

The first step in the process is to determine what are the academic standards for a subject matter area being considered for telecourse production. Basically, this is done by conducting a "market" research effort to outline the dimensions of the curriculum and current practices in the teaching of a particular course, on campuses, nationwide. Then producing institutions must develop a system of design and production utilizing a team of people which includes a significant role for academic advisors and a variety of kinds of academic input.

Market Research, sometimes called pre-course research, is undertaken whenever we are contemplating producing a telecourse on a particular topic. Ideally, it's conducted by a researcher working in cooperation with an instructional designer. Pre-course research is based on the assumption that you can't decide what standards you'll follow until you know what these standards are. The research attempts to uncover much information about a specific subject, such as:

- differences between the way two- and four-year schools define the course;
- potential for transfer credit;
- "home" department or discipline;
- lab or other special requirements that might pose special problems for a telecourse format;
- the three or four most widely used and respected textbooks;
- the most common topics covered in the course;

- special requirements from states or organizations;
- the number of units of credit the course usually receives;
- and the major controversies in the field.

With the information gathered from this research, we can make the basic decisions regarding the content parameters, requirements, and level of the course. And, we can choose the most crucial element defining the course level and content parameters--the textbook--in light of its appropriateness to the subject and the intended college audience.

The result of this process is that production can be planned in light of a specific course description. Here is a hypothetical course description: "This will be an introductory, general education course, designed to fulfill transfer course requirements. Recommended for three units of credit. It will have a specially designed home-lab component, plus suggestions for on-campus activities. It will cover the three main theoretical approaches to the subject and the following topics...." These are the academic standards specifying the content and level of a telecourse. As with a college catalog description, it commits the producing institution to delivering a course meeting those standards.

I believe that conducting some kind of pre-course research is a crucial step in uncovering important standards for the curriculum which will be covered in the telecourse. As with other kinds of educational research, in practice, it may get too little time, too few funds, and its findings can be ignored. But if the research is not collected prior to production, those

involved will find themselves without the necessary information to proceed and will have to stop production in order to gather the base-line data.

But specifying the level and standards in advance does not guarantee achieving those standards during production. Thus, the need for the next aspect of the process of design and production of telecourses which is the achievement of quality production by members of the course team. At Coastline Community College, the course team includes the television producer, the instructional designer, and one or more academic advisors, editors, and writers; it serves to bring together video, print, and content advisors, as specialists, to produce the products in the telecourse.

The academic advisor or, more likely, advisors, have particular responsibility for providing the course content and checking for accuracy, but they are not the sole determinants of course content. With the instructional designer and with advice and input from advisory committees and special consultants, they define the overall course goals, topics, sequence, and instructional objectives. Thus, instructors who are chosen to work on telecourses need to be selected carefully. They must not only be informed and current in their area of expertise, but they have to be able to work with other academics and accept the predetermined course framework. The need for multiple advisors for telecourses has been confirmed for me by my experiences with having scripts reviewed. After sending the same script to three different reviewers, I receive back three differing assessments of accuracy. And, usually, all are valid. No one person knows enough to catch all possible errors in scripts for 26 half-hour television programs.

This isn't to say that the more advisors the better. Too many academics involved will slow the production schedule to a point of being unworkable. But, in general, the presence of academics and other experts on the course team and provision for expert review provides a crucial procedure for quality control during the production process.

One result of this teamwork approach is that no one person's biases or point of view can dominate the production process. I consider it a healthy process of checks and balances because throughout the production process which will require probably thousands of large and small decisions, the existence of a team will help prevent content errors. Furthermore, the mix of different points of view and specializations is a stimulating process that will result in a better telecourse than any one person could create individually.

The practices and procedures of the leading telecourse producers in recent years have been moving toward more formal and open design and production processes. More advanced planning, research, and consultation with specialists have all been necessary in order to raise the funds necessary to begin production and also to insure completing a product that will have the widest possible use among colleges and appeal to students.

But there is another characteristic of telecourses which demands careful procedures. What a teacher says in the classroom is rarely scrutinized by academic peers. Campus evaluation practices do not include checking or interfering in the actual presentation of a course in class. But the public nature of telecourses leads to a bias toward quality control. Telecourses are open to evaluation by faculty, students, and the general public. What single campus instructor would like or tolerate that kind of scrutiny?

But, if Coast and other telecourse producers follow such tight and thorough procedures for establishing and maintaining standards, why are telecourses under attack in California? Let's look for a minute at the California situation. The first thing to understand is that some of the reviews are normal processes involved in accreditation and articulation between two-year and four-year institutions in the state. Another important factor is that the concern about telecourse standards is motivated not just objective inquiry over standards and procedures, but by concerns about job security and personal preferences in teaching styles.

There are four different levels of concern about telecourses. I'll just briefly list the four and outline the issues.

The first level of inquiry consists of questions being raised by faculty members at the two colleges in the Coast Community College District about the telecourses designed and produced by a third college in the District, Coastline Community College. The questioning comes at a time of dispute between the faculty and the District administration over policy matters involving the District ownership of a public television station, state funding cutbacks resulting in the lay-off of classroom teachers, and a collective bargaining situation.

The second level of investigation, prompted in part by the publicity from the first situation, was an investigation of Coastline's telecourses undertaken by the statewide Academic Senate of the California State University system. The Assistant Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Robert Bess, spent several months reviewing data on specific telecourses, Coastline's procedures for designing and offering courses and research findings, and in

February, 1983, wrote a memorandum summarizing his findings. In general, his conclusions were supportive of telecourses. To quote his final words:

> "No one person is likely to be competent to judge the academic adequacy of each of the thirty-eight telecourses in question. However, I have had extensive experience involving accreditation and credit transfer. This experience leads me to conclude that there are a good many institutions, two- and four-year, which use instructional approaches far less time intensive than the Coastline telecourses. The evidence suggests a conscientious effort to provide opportunity for students who are sufficiently motivated to invest the time and effort to do a good deal of independent learning.
>
> The institution is accredited. Going behind accreditation except under extraordinary circumstances has serious implications for all of us. We question Coastline's telecourses (as telecourses). Someone else questions our Computer Aided Instruction or our grading standards and so it goes. Given the information I have reviewed and summarized in this report, I do not believe that such extraordinary circumstances exist."

The Academic Senate and the staff of the office for Academic Affairs of the California State University system will continue to monitor telecourses as part of their ongoing responsibility for coordinating and reviewing general education transfer courses. Individual campuses will also review telecourses in the process of updating articulation agreements between two- and four-year campuses.

The third review of telecourses in 1982-83 came as part of the regular accreditation process. Coastline was scheduled for its six-year review in 1983, and the team visited the college in March of this year. Recognizing the concern over telecourse quality and standards, the college established a special committee to study and write a report on all aspects of Coastline's use of telecourses. This was incorporated into the college's self-study document. The visit appeared to go very well and the official report of the

accrediting commission will be made public later this year.* I'm sure that the outcomes will be studied by other two-year colleges offering telecourses in California and elsewhere.

The last review is being undertaken by the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) of the University of California. The exact focus of this review and its relationship to the accreditation process and standard articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions in California are all unclear at this point, and make this review especially complex.

Conclusions

As we've seen in California and will see elsewhere, a new mode of education such as instructional television is bound to be heavily scrutinized. Those of us in the business must accept this as inevitable and be prepared to respond with information about all aspects of the new process. We need to conduct institutional research and press for cooperative research, so that when the inevitable questioning and criticism comes, we can respond with detailed information rather than a few guesses.

As an instructional designer, I have a particular bias: given that telecourses will be appraised and compared to other modes of instruction, objective evaluation is more possible when a course is built around course goals and specific instructional objectives. Without that structure, the criteria for comparison and evaluation may be set by such noninstructional

*Coastline received a full six-year accreditation by the Accrediting Commission for Junior Colleges Western Association of Schools and Colleges in June, 1983.

considerations as "time spent"--the old Carnegie Unit System of measuring learning. The controversy in our district has hinged around that very issue: how can telecourses be equal to classroom instruction if a student spends 45 hours a semester in a classroom but only watches 13 hours or 26 half-hours of television in a telecourse? Only if we can propose and document a better way will such an invalid way of evaluating telecourses be discarded. So I hope we will continue to produce telecourses designed to be evaluated in terms of what students have learned and can do at the end of the course. This has to be the most important criteria of quality for judging any mode of instruction.

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